

THE PARISH CHEST AND STORING BIRCHINGTON PARISH ARCHIVES.

Originally, all the documents relating to the parish were stored in the Parish Chest, which was kept at the west end of the church. The chest is mentioned by the Revd. H.A. Serres M.A.¹ In it he states:

‘There are also in the Parish Chest and Safe very old Books of the Homilies, Prayer Books, Communion Books, ancient Briefs, Proclamations, Wills, etc.’

The Churchwardens’ Accounts also mention the Parish Chest – and this is referred to by Alfred T. Walker.² Between the years 1534 and 1550 there are four references to the chest³The chest is not mentioned once it no longer housed the collection. By the 1920’s the church had new vestries (built in 1910) and in the choir vestry, a cupboard was used to store the majority of the material, with only the most ancient and valuable being stored in the safe, bought in 1899.

In the early 1970’s, purpose-built oak cupboards were specially put into the choir vestry to house the documents. Unfortunately, although they were large, they were fitted with two sliding doors. This meant that access to the central section on each of the 7 shelves was at a very awkward angle. The files holding much of the material were laid on their backs, stacked in piles, one on top of the other. The labels were placed in the centre of each one, so in order to find a particular one, each file had to be dragged forward before the label could be read. As there was no special order for the way they were stored, a particular folder was difficult to locate and it was almost impossible to replace it in its original position.

¹ Short Guide to the Parish Church of All Saints Birchington by H.A. Serres, p. 19, 2nd Edition 1913

² The Ville of Birchington – Its History & Its Bygones by Alfred Walker, p. 11, 4th Edition 1999

³ See Appendix No.

When the present Archivist took over in 1985, these difficulties were all too apparent, but as the previous Archivist was always at hand to help, things were left as they were, until Mr Walker died in 1989. Soon after this, the sliding doors were converted into hinged ones and the files were all resorted, coded and relabelled. They now stand on their bases, with additional labels in the top left hand corner. Each of the shelves has been numbered and the three which are used for the files are colour coded, so that locating and replacing files takes the minimum time and effort.

In about 1997, Dr Michael Stansfield began removing the oldest items from the collection into the safe keeping of Canterbury Cathedral Archives.⁴ The aim was to remove all material before 1900. This was not very practical as some of the registers spanned the years across the 1900 bridge and were still frequently consulted by local parishioners. For this reason, we still hold some of the pre-1900 material for the time being.

The cupboard is now in need of a further re-ordering, as there are some large spaces on certain shelves. There will be no difficulty in filling these spaces, as the material collected during the production of the topic on 'The Buildings of Birchington'⁵ will now have its own area in the archive. There are already 17 new files waiting to go into the church. It was in researching this project that much of the evidence for Medieval Birchington's buildings was uncovered.

⁴ The oldest register, dating from 1538, had already been taken there some time ago.

⁵ Begun by the present Archivist in May 1999.